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Op Ed-The Continuing Dilemma of Defining Databases: the New Digital Normal

Sue Wiegand

Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, sweigand@saintmarys.edu

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Op Ed — The Continuing Dilemma of Defining Databases: the New Digital Normal

by **Sue Wiegand** (Periodicals Librarian, 123 Cushwa-Leighton Library, Saint Mary's College, Notre Dame, IN 46556; Phone: 574-284-4789) <swiegand@saintmarys.edu>

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things." Librarians may have as many words for electronic journals as northern peoples have for snow, yet communication can falter when others rely on different terminology. Can we make our words for ejournals mean the one thing we want them to mean?

Back in 2002, I wrote an article for *Against the Grain's* **Biz of Acq** column called "A Database by Any Other Name" (*ATG*, 2002, pp. 62-64) discussing how we define different types of databases — the Indexing and Abstracting (A&I) databases, the aggregator databases, generic electronic resources, individual ejournals, ejournal packages — current and archival. There were few agreed-upon standards, and everyone, it seemed, was in search of guidelines for best practices in assembling library collections that were cost-effective and responsive to the needs of their users. It hasn't gotten any easier.

After that article, I tried various ways of thinking about how to fit the disparate models into a classification scheme with ten categories, headed by what I called the "print equivalent" subscription, based on such factors as description and access level. The print equivalent's defining characteristics were that the source of the online subscription was the primary publisher rather than a third party, with the publisher's own interface instead of hosted somewhere else. The subscription should be organized as individual titles as print journals are, to be a print equivalent — with cover-to-cover content included, no embargoes.

The journal's full text should be the same as the print, I thought, with no omissions; any additional content would be like a supplement. It should offer very stable licensing (i.e., not likely to go missing from an aggregator when the licensing contract was due for renewal).

Allowing for easy access (and therefore high use and high impact) through a variety of methods would be important — it should be possible for the resource to be catalogued, linked through a link resolver, and in an A to Z list. Especially important — the metadata would have to be both current and include previous titles in a seamless way that is transparent to users, no matter how they arrived at the article of interest.

One stop, click and go — for the librarian and for the patron — that was my idea of a print equivalent ejournal.

Others have slightly differing approaches. In a 2005 article, **Parker and Dollar** (*Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 2005, pp. 421-426) asked the rhetorical question "E-Terminology: Why Do I Need to Know What You Mean?" and, focusing on selectors of resources, answered that consistent terminology ultimately improved communication with patrons as well as the reference librarians who help users find articles.

Other issues? Oh, yes, we need to be able to present these options to the user easily on the library Webpage. Access questions also lead to instruction and reference concerns — will the resource be findable? If cited, can the resource be found later by other researchers? This is scholarly communication we're talking about here, after all — centuries after the first journals appeared, continuity of the scholarly record is still a sacred trust. Standards are still evolving to manage ejournals most effectively but should help with discoverability.

For librarians, some of the issues are related to collection development, acquisitions, and evaluation, including usage metrics. Usage statistics depend on access; the decisions to continue subscriptions depend more and more on usage statistics — why subscribe to something that's not much used, in these times of budget restraints? More expensive, high-quality journals could also be provided in some cases by

other means, such as pay-per-view (also known as document delivery, pay-per-download, demand-driven acquisitions, or patron-driven collection development — another conundrum.)

No longer is it necessary to argue the advantages of online access. Yet, the new models — Open Access, pre-prints and post-prints, repositories, embargoes, crowdsourced peer review, versioning, datasets, embedded media, security, privacy, archiving and preservation, copyright, Fair Use, and discovery layers, to name a few — all these and more lead to new avenues of exploration (as well as opportunities for confusion, for us and for our users). The revolution continues.

When attempting to define databases, we need to evaluate based on the most important features: access, interface, perpetual rights, and archiving immediately come to mind. At the same time, we can examine alternate access methods such as pay-per-view for less frequently used titles on an article-by-article basis. Bundled titles from trusted sources may have a place in our calculations as we try to determine the best mix of resources for our individual libraries. In many cases, aggregated databases fill the needs of a library's users at a very low per-title cost. First, though, we have to know what we're getting, based on our definitions of terms. Nomenclature matters.

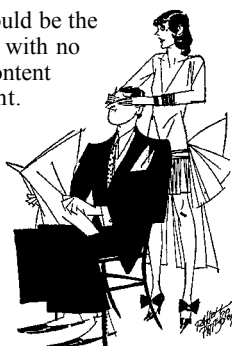
For aggregated databases, our subscription is to the database, not the individual journals. The provider licenses content and presents it conveniently in one interface. Thus, we have only one place to find articles. Yet problems of duplication across subscribed databases, or, conversely, exclusive contracts may hinder our efforts to build a cost-effective collection. If stability or archival preservation is a concern, perpetual access rights may play a role. There are advantages of convenience for librarians as well as ease of instruction and use if there are fewer different interfaces for librarians to manage and library patrons to learn how to navigate. We have to be able to describe what we define in precise language, for the sake of comparison when we choose resources, or we might each be describing an elephant based on different parts of its anatomy, as in the old Buddhist tale.

Access is about finding full-text content of interest. Librarians tend to want to improve the organization of materials, both physical locations and virtual metadata, but the trend is more towards discoverability. Yet the two are inextricably linked. Librarians use their expertise to design ways of organizing scholarly content and then instructing patrons until they are empowered to use scholarly resources competently to fulfill their needs for discovering, evaluating, and creating new knowledge.

In Collection Development, new models beyond the packages or bundles are developing — patron or demand-driven acquisitions, pay-per-view, eBook collections — all add to the way the librarian blends a mix of resources into a coherent educational experience.

So many issues, so little time. How can we best manage our eResources?

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Book Reviews — Monographic Musings

Column Editor: **Debbie Vaughn** (College of Charleston) <vaughnd@cofc.edu>



Column Editor's Note: Open access is an important topic in librarianship; it's also a rather hot topic these days in the realm of higher education. MOOCs — that is, massive open online courses — are to higher education what open access is to libraries. They are changing the landscape in a myriad of ways: everything from the credit hour to assessment of student learning to the honor code is being examined through this new lens of open educational resources. Pardon my colloquialism, but thinking of the expansive opportunities for collaboration between libraries and MOOCs makes me twitter. Public access to library materials within the structure of an academic course not only further evolves the symbiotic relationship between the library and academe; it is yet another manifestation of some major librarian-philosophers' core beliefs about the shifting role of the library and the role of the library in the public sphere of education/information (**Ranganathan's** belief that the library is a growing organism and **Michael Gorman's** belief that libraries should protect free access to knowledge, to name a few).

In this month's *MM*, reviewer **William Joseph Thomas** explores **Peter Suber's** new title *Open Access*. **Suber** writes rather frequently on this topic, as one would expect given his position as Director of the Harvard Open Access Project and his stature in the territory of open access issues. Many thanks to **Joseph** for offering his thoughtful review of this work.

Happy reading, everyone! — **DV**

Suber, Peter. *Open Access*. Essential Knowledge. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012. 978-0-262-51763-8. 230 pages. \$12.95.

Reviewed by **Wm. Joseph Thomas** (Head of Collection Development, Joyner Library, East Carolina University) <thomasw@ecu.edu>

Part of **MIT Press's** *Essential Knowledge* series, **Peter Suber's** *Open Access* provides an overview of a topic of growing interest to funders and legislators, as well as librarians and authors. Acknowledging that this book is built in part on earlier writings, **Suber** strikes a hopeful and encouraging note, and in general achieves his goal of a clear, concise description of "the basics" for busy people.

Suber begins by defining open access literature as that which is "digital, online, free of charge, and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions" and later defines related terms such as Green OA (materials deposited to repositories) and Gold OA (open access journals), Gratis OA (free to read but not free of copyright constraints) and Libre OA (free to read and free of at least some permission barriers). **Suber** demonstrates how these "flavors" of open access are "complementary and synergistic" in shifting attitudes toward OA as the default for research dissemination.

Open Access points out that many conventional publishers are already experimenting with open access. Indeed, **Suber** describes the "blanket permission" for green OA that most conventional publishers agree to as one of the "best-kept secrets of scholarly publishing" (54-55). There is a difficult balancing act to strike with publishers, though, because their gate-keeping role related to peer review has been extended into access barriers to knowledge. Although **Suber** argues for OA as a benefit and not an attempt to "harm" conventional publishers, the problems he points out that OA can solve are primarily economically based, related to pricing and inflation, Big Deals, and library budgets. The barriers to access that OA fights were created and are maintained largely in order to protect publisher revenue.

A touchstone for **Suber's** book is the power of authors in effecting open access — they control the volume and growth of OA because they decide where to publish their work and

what to do with their copyrights.

Suber champions the academic freedom of authors to choose where they publish, knowing that in most cases they can still reap the benefits of some sort of open access to their research. Authors also govern the scope of OA by determining what types of materials can be made OA, whether journal articles, ETDs, monographs, or research data. Open access is compatible with current copyright law and independent of peer review. **Suber** makes the point eloquently that all key players involved in vetting research — authors, editors, and peer reviewers — can consent to OA without losing any revenue. Not only that, **Suber** makes the case that distributing research freely is a public gift with both direct and indirect benefits to all.

Although it is treated at each necessary point on the way, copyright is also the subject of a short chapter. In addition to demonstrating the legality of open access, this chapter points out that existing mandates strengthen the author's bargaining position with publishers who might want wholesale transfer of copyrights as a condition of publication. One issue not overtly explained is how libre OA, in removing barriers to use such as making multiple copies or redistributing, cannot also alleviate authors' concerns about unscrupulous copyright infringement. Another issue not fully addressed is how OA may be perceived by promotion and tenure review committees, especially in light of how this process privileges traditional publishing for many reticent faculty members.

Other chapters provide detail on funding models for OA, describe OA policies for funders and institutions, and allay publishers' fears that OA as a movement will cause subscription cancellations. **Suber** closes with a short helpful chapter letting interested authors know how they can make their work OA. A short glossary, extensive notes, a list of additional resources, and a comprehensive index round out the volume. Portions of *Open Access* are OA now, and the entire work will become freely available in June 2013, one year after publication.

Open Access joins **Walt Crawford's** ALA Special Report *Open Access: What You Need to Know Now* (2011) in introducing open access publishing, but whereas **Crawford's** book is oriented primarily toward librarians, **Suber's** audience is wider, and **Suber** offers more extensive resources for further reading. Neither of these books approaches the depth of **John Willinsky's** *The Access Principle* (2006), or **Neil Jacobs's** *Open Access: Key Strategic, Technical, and Economic Aspects* (2006), but then again, they aren't designed to do so. If the readers of **Suber's** book will take action on providing access to knowledge as a "public good," we can indeed complete the "peaceful revolution" that **Suber** envisions. 🌱

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One of the most important developments in these free-wheeling days is the growth of standards to help us to define our terms. **NISO** is the go-to source for standards in this time of transition and radical transformations. Their Data Dictionary includes not just "Books and Serials (print materials)" but also "Emetrics" for "Current Serials Received," "Current Subscriptions," and "Current Serial Titles." There are ongoing working groups for the licenses,

eJournals, discovery systems, knowledge bases, and usage statistics, among others. Standards provide common definitions for acquiring, linking, listing, cataloging, managing, troubleshooting, evaluating, and assessing our costly electronic resources — all crucial components for managing library resources even as new terms proliferate.

With an increasingly digitized future, librarians can influence the course of the future of scholarly communication to become more intentional in the use of terminology. As **Alice** might say, do our words mean what we choose them to mean? 🌱